

JOANNA WASZCZUK  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8823-7691>  
j.waszczuk@dydaktyka.pswbp.pl  
HELENA KONOWALUK-NIKITIN  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5128-3982>  
konowaluk@gmail.com  
EWA PAWŁOWICZ-SOSNOWSKA  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9391-7886>  
e.pawlowicz@dydaktyka.pswbp.pl  
Państwowa Szkoła Wyższa  
im. Papieża Jana Pawła II w Białej Podlaskiej

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## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WITH THE EXAMPLE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II STATE SCHOOL OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BIAŁA PODLASKA

Interest in the problem of the participation of people with disabilities in public, social, professional and, in particular, educational life has increased over the past few years both worldwide and in Poland. The literature on the subject includes numerous publications concerning the education of children and youth with disabilities. This is not surprising since education at the primary as well as secondary school level is obligatory in Poland. It is also a condition for taking up higher education. The functioning of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is not so widely commented on in the literature. According to the data by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the number of university students with disabilities amounted to 22,988 in 2007, and it increased to 31,613 by 2012. However, there has been a decline in the number of university students with disabilities since 2013. There were 28,940 university students with disabilities in 2013, while only 25,121 strived to receive third-level education in 2016, which constituted 1.86% of the total number of students in Poland. The fact that only 4.6% of people with disabilities had third-level education in 2002 is also worth noting. Since 2006, the number of students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska has maintained a relatively permanent level of 50 people, representing 1.7% of the total number of students at the school. The objective of the study was to define the specificity of the functioning of the students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska in the context of educational conditions offered to them by the school. The findings show that students with disabilities point to their difficult individual situation rather than to the conditions provided by the university as the source of their difficulties in studying.

*Keywords:* university education, inclusive education, students with disabilities, barriers

### Disability and education – contextual and temporal applications

Higher education for students with disabilities is determined by the creation of adequate conditions for studying, adjusted to the needs of this group of people. The binding provisions of law may be found useful in this scope. In the

Charter of the Rights of People with Disabilities, the Polish Sejm specifies that in accordance with the legal and customary norms, people with disabilities have the right to independent, autonomous, and active life and cannot be subject to discrimination. They must have a guaranteed right to study at school side by side with their nondisabled peers and to use special education facilities or individual education options.

The literature on the subject includes numerous publications concerning education for children and youth with disabilities (Dłużniewska & Kucharczyk, 2015; Palak, Bujnowska, & Pawlak, 2010; Piszczek, 2008; Tomkiewicz-Bętkowska & Krztoń, 2011; Sher, 2013; Szumski, 2013). It is not surprising since education at the primary as well as secondary school level is obligatory in Poland (Education Law, 2016). It is also a condition for taking up higher education. The functioning of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is commented on in the literature by Helena Ochonczenko, among others. The author carried out a diagnosis of the situation of students with disabilities attending the University of Zielona Góra. Bearing in mind the specificity of the functioning of the studied group, five groups of problems and needs were identified: removing architectural barriers, improving the conditions of studying, better access to information on entitlements and offers in the area of assistance, financial aid, transportation, communication, treatment or rehabilitation (Ochonczenko & Miłkowska, 2005).

Thus, how can we define disability? In accordance with the *Act on vocational and social rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities* (1997), the definition of a person with disability is as follows: People with disabilities are people whose physical, psychological or mental state permanently or temporarily hinders, limits or prevents the fulfilment of social roles and, in particular, limits their ability to perform professional work (ibidem). The World Programme of Action for Disabled Persons and the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities underline that disability is a social issue which cannot be limited to an individual person. Discussing disability, we should be mindful of the relation between human health (considering a person's age, gender, and education) and the society and environment he or she lives in. The World Health Organization introduced the following concepts of the disability:

Impairment – any loss of ability or abnormality in the body structure or functions in a psychological, psychophysical or anatomical sense; Disability – any limitation or inability (stemming from malfunctions) of carrying out an active life in a manner and scope regarded as typical for a human being; Constraints in performing social functions (handicap) – infirmity of a given individual stemming from an impairment or disability, limiting or preventing his or her full realization of the social role relevant to age and gender and compliant with social and cultural determinants ([www.who.int/](http://www.who.int/)).

The above presented content indicates that one cannot speak of barriers of a legal nature when it comes to the realization of all life tasks related to age, legal norms, and social expectations by people with disabilities. A relevant act imposes the creation of conditions which support the education of children with disabilities. At the level of legislation and children's rights, the system of education ensures the following for children with disabilities: possibility of receiving

education jointly with their nondisabled peers; implementation of individualized teaching programs; adaptation of teaching methods and content to the psychophysical skills of a child (Konarska, 2015). Another act on vocational and social rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities focuses on the rights of people who have completed their education (*Act on vocational and social rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities*, 1997).

According to the Central Statistical Office, in 2007, the number of university students with disabilities amounted to 22,988 and it increased until 2012 to reach the level of 31,613 people. There were 28,940 university students with disabilities in 2013, while only 25,121 strived to receive third-level education in 2016, which constituted 1.86% of the total number of students in Poland. The fact that in 2002, only 4.6% of people with disabilities had third-level education deserves some attention. Since 2006, the number of students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska has remained at a relatively stable level of 50 people, which constitutes 1.7% of the total number of students at this school. Data concerning people who are legally and biologically disabled are gathered through national censuses that are carried out with a given frequency (in Poland – every 10 years) as well as sample surveys (questionnaires): surveys related to the health of the population (in Poland – every 5 years, since 2004), and the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC – every year since 2005) ([www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,122,zrodla-danych-osobach-niepelnosprawnych](http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,122,zrodla-danych-osobach-niepelnosprawnych); [www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,123,edukacja](http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,123,edukacja)).

The functioning of people with disabilities is rooted in the reality of economic, family, and educational life. The education of people with disabilities in Poland takes place at the level of primary, secondary, and higher education schools. The interest in getting a third-level education is understandable, as it determines obtaining work, positively impacts people's development and living situation. However, people with disabilities struggle with various difficulties called barriers on their path towards obtaining higher education.

The concept of a *barrier* most often resembles a physical obstacle which hinders or prevents an action. The architectural barriers stand for all construction elements which due to their form or manner of use hinder or even prevent the freedom of movement for people, especially those with limited physical ability. This concerns the fragments of buildings, complexes of functional elements, and technical devices present inside buildings or constituting independent spatial elements (Jaranowska, 1996). Another group of barriers are social barriers which stem from the conviction of healthy, nondisabled people that disability is a personal issue of people with disabilities. Feelings of pity, compassion, sorrow whilst encountering a person with disability lead to such consequences as reluctance, withdrawal from contact, and in the future – avoidance. Social-economic transformations taking place in Poland force people with disabilities to overcome various barriers, including economic ones. The necessity to buy expensive medications, pay for rehabilitation, purchase specialist medical equipment makes the material position of people with disabilities much worse than nondisabled people's situation. The last type of barriers are the mental ones. They appear at the time when parents consider their child as a disabled person straight after his or

her birth or when this fact becomes visible later on. A diagnosis of a disability often causes a painful feeling of unfulfilled self-realization in parents themselves and even a conflict between aversion to such a child and parental feelings (Witkowska, 1993).

The most important features of inclusive education are: inclusion applies to all students in school, inclusion and exclusion are related to each other, so inclusion means actively combating exclusion, inclusion is a continuous process, not a final state, is a movement that requires constant attention and vigilance (Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2010).

### **Research methodology**

The objective of the study was to define the specificity of the functioning of students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska in the context of educational conditions offered to them by the school. The following research problem was defined in the study: What inclusive strategies should be applied in the case of the occurrence of architectural, economic, social, psychological, cultural, and educational barriers which hinder studying for people with disabilities?

In the study, the procedure of a diagnostic survey with the use of a questionnaire designed by the authors containing open-ended questions, closed questions, and demographic questions was applied. The second research method was an analysis of documents concerning the studied group held in possession by the school. Moreover, an interview was conducted with the University President's Plenipotentiary for the Affairs of People with Disabilities.

The responses do not sum up to 100 in most cases, as the students with disabilities had a possibility to select several categories of answers.

### **Research location**

The conducted research covered students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska. The University was established in 2000. At present, it educates approximately 3,000 students in 18 courses and 43 specializations in B.A. and engineering programs, long-cycle master's degree programs, and second-study cycles. The courses which are most popular include, among others: economics, nursing, pedagogy, and emergency medical services. The school has a modern student campus which encompasses: two buildings with lecture halls, a sports hall with a part with lecture halls and a pitch, a student dormitory, research centers: Center for Research and Innovation [Centrum Badań nad Innowacjami (CBNI)], Regional Center for Environmental Research and Innovative Technologies (EKO-AGRO-TECH), a university library, and a leisure center ([www.pswbp.pl/index.php/pl/dlaczego-warto-studiowaw-psw/6953](http://www.pswbp.pl/index.php/pl/dlaczego-warto-studiowaw-psw/6953)). All the school buildings are adapted to the requirements of people with disabilities. Students with disabilities have separate bathrooms, ramps at the entrances to the buildings, elevators, vertical platform lifts as well as specially prepared rooms in the dorms at their disposal. According to the information ob-

tained from the University President's Plenipotentiary for the Affairs of People With Disabilities, in April of 2017, six parking spaces were marked for people with disabilities in accordance with the binding provisions, that is, with the P-24 symbol of a person in a wheelchair on a blue background placed on the road surface.

The presented research was carried out at the University for the first time and constituted a fragment of a larger research project entitled "Pedagogical implications of the University's activities."

The research was carried out in the 2015/2016 academic year and in the 2016/2017 academic year and covered newly enrolled students with disabilities. Research respondents were qualified for the project (purposive sampling) on the basis of the data concerning the special scholarship for students with disabilities they were awarded. The research covered 75 students with disabilities. In practice, the number of students with disabilities is far bigger. The research did not include students of extramural studies or evening courses as well as those who did not receive benefits for students with disabilities.

### **Characteristics of the respondents**

Based on the collected research material, students with disabilities were characterized.

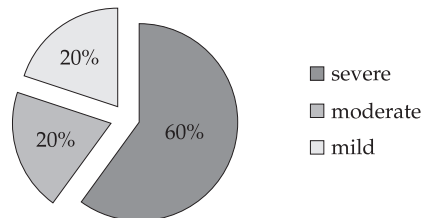
The gender of the respondents was identified. As many as 22% of the respondents were women and 78% were men. Students in all years at the age of 19–42 were covered in the research. The respondents studied in the following courses: sociology (36%), pedagogy (27%), economics (11%), computer science (8%), management (5%), and physiotherapy (5%). Courses such as: agriculture, public health, national security, tourism and recreation as well as finance and accounting were the choice of 1% of the respondents.

By far the largest group of the respondents were in full-time first-cycle degree programs (74%), whilst 26% of the respondents were in second-cycle degree programs.

In terms of the place of residence, the study respondents did not present a diverse structure: 35% of them lived in cities with population of 51–100 thousand inhabitants, 36% lived in the countryside, and 29% – in towns with up to 50 thousand inhabitants. The largest percentage of the students with disabilities (84%) completed general high school, 13% completed specialized high school, and 3% – technical high school. When asked about their school results, 58% of the respondents indicated that they were within the range of 4.00–3.00, whilst this mark was within the range of 4.00–5.00 for 40% of the respondents, and within the range of 3.00–1.00 for 2% of the respondents.

The possibility of undertaking and continuing studies at the level of higher education is also determined by the severity of disability. Figure 1 illustrates the respondents' replies.

Bearing in mind the severity of disability, the largest group comprised students with severe disabilities (60%). The same number declared having mild and moderate disabilities, that is 20% respectively.

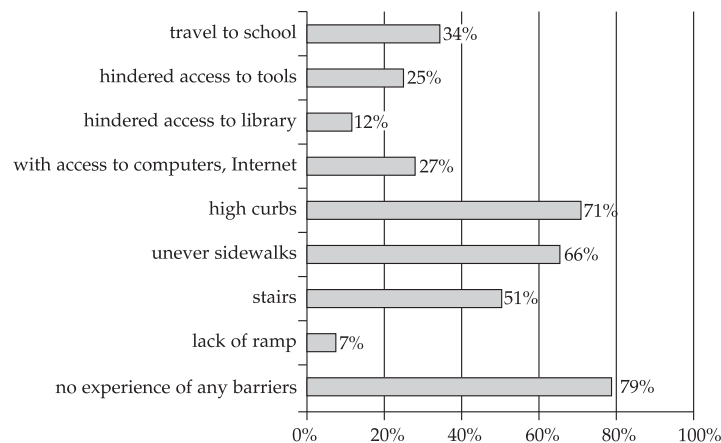


**Figure 1.** Severity of disability among the respondents

Source: Compiled by the authors.

## Research results

The conducted research led to the emergence of several significant results. At the beginning, the type of architectural barriers for students with disabilities was determined. The results are presented in Figure 2.

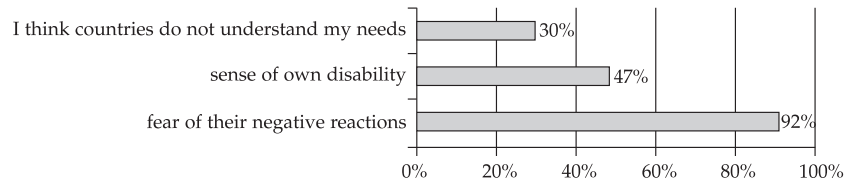


**Figure 2.** Architectural barriers

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The vast majority of the respondents (71%) indicated very high curbs among architectural barriers. For 66% of the respondents, the main barrier involved uneven sidewalks, and 51% of the survey participants pointed to the stairs. As many as 34% of the respondents must cope with the problem of travelling to school on a daily basis. A significant factor which determines obtaining education is access to the Internet and a computer, 27% of the respondents indicated that this was troublesome for them. As many as 25% of the respondents pointed out a hindered access to study devices and aids in the course of their classes. A hindered access to the library was noted by 12% of the respondents participating in the research. Lack of a ramp (platform) constituted an obstacle in moving around for 7% of the respondents.

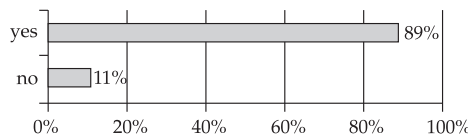
From a number of difficulties faced by those who are disabled, special attention should be given to those that limit integration with the academic community. The answers are collected in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Difficulty in integration with the academic community  
 Source: Compiled by the authors.

The collected responses reflected subjective feelings of the respondents. As many as 92% of them concerned the fear of the negative reaction from colleagues. The feeling of shame at their own disability is a problem for 47% of the respondents. As many as 30% of the students with disabilities are of the opinion that other students will not understand their needs.

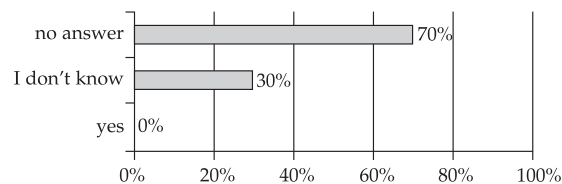
The barriers hindering the functioning of students with disabilities indicated by the authors include, among others, architectural barriers; the adaptation of the exam form to the needs of the above-mentioned group should also be assessed. Within the context of the types of disabilities, adjusting the form of exams to the needs of individual students becomes of significance. Thus, the question was asked whether there was a possibility to adjust exams to the situation of exam-takers. The replies of the respondents are presented in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Adjustment of the form of exams to the needs of students with disabilities  
 Source: Compiled by the authors.

Due to their disability, many students expect the lecturers to treat them with forbearance and goodwill. As many as 89% of the respondents declared receiving the above, whilst 11% indicated their lack.

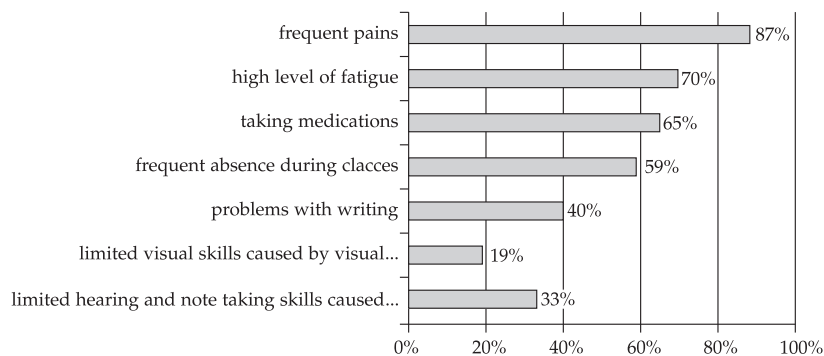
The respondents were also asked to indicate the type of equipment/software facilitating studying that they wished to use and be able to rent out from the school rental for students with disabilities. Figure 5 presents their answers.



**Figure 5.** Available software  
 Source: Compiled by the authors

In 70% of the cases, no answers were noted. As many as 30% of the respondents replied, "I don't know." Additional notes were provided, though: "Moodle platform" and "e-learning with a full database of lectures."

Among the types of difficulties which are encountered in the course of studying, one must pay attention to those which stem from the disability itself. Thus, this type of obstacles was specified in more detail within the research. Figure 6 illustrates the answers.



**Figure 6.** Difficulties in learning which are the result of disabilities

*Source: Compiled by the authors.*

The replies of 87% of the respondents referred to the occurrence of frequent pains. A high level of fatigue was a difficulty in learning noted by 70% of the respondents, whilst 59% of them indicated frequent absence from classes as troublesome. As many as 19% of the students mentioned difficulty reading caused by visual disorders. Difficulties with hearing and note taking caused by hearing disorders were pointed out by 33% of the respondents.

### Conclusions for pedagogical practice

The role of the diagnosis was to make a full description of the problems and needs of students with disabilities. Diagnosis of the functioning of this group of students at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska pointed out the need to implement strategies to include people with disabilities in the academic community.

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that the problems noticed by the students with disabilities at the State School of Higher Education have a much broader context than the educational context. They are associated with the generally difficult life situation of individuals and not with the conditions of organization of the education process offered by the University. Among the diagnosed problems felt most severely, health problems resulting from the disability come to the fore: voice, speech, hearing, and visual disorders, high fatigue, and motor dysfunctions. Diagnosed problems with writing (taking notes) and reading are associated with frequent absences from classes. The group of material problems perceived by the students with disabilities relates to high costs of treat-



ment, the need to purchase specialized medical and rehabilitation equipment as well as medicines.

According to the respondents, architectural barriers also prevent or hinder freedom of movement. It is the University's responsibility to remove and eliminate physical obstacles limiting their use by people with disabilities who move from places, buildings and use equipment available to non-disabled people. Among architectural barriers, uneven sidewalks, no ramps (platforms), stairs, difficult access to study instruments and aids during classes were indicated. However, the vast majority of indications referred to the lack of any difficulty in moving around. The respondents also acknowledged that the University, as a place of education, is well adapted to the needs of students with disabilities. The effectiveness of the teaching process is undoubtedly demonstrated by the possibility of using the full infrastructure of the University, which means full access to all rooms and floors. The respondents believe (100%) that the State School of Higher Education guarantees them freedom of movement around the campus. Concern for the comfort of work of education entities is an expression of the answer to the educational expectations of this group of people.

An important factor that determines gaining a university degree is access to the Internet, computers, and appropriate software. Among technical barriers they encountered, the students with disabilities indicated that they had problems with this. According to Czerwińska (2005, p. 156) "such results raise concern about the functioning of these students, and then graduates in the information society (...)." What turned out to be the biggest problem was the diagnosed occurrence of anxiety, dissatisfaction with life, lack of social support, or even symptoms of depression (lack of energy, decreased appetite, difficulty in concentrating, indecision, anxiety, thoughts of self-harm or suicide). The functioning of a person, including the one with disabilities, can be seen in three areas: psyche, soma, and polis. These areas allow us to include a human being as a social being subject to social expectations and requirements (polis), a living organism with specific capabilities and vulnerable to damage (soma) and (psyche) a being that perceives, experiences, makes decisions. Adopting this perspective shows the relationship between the body, psyche, and social life of a person with disabilities. Damage to the body (disability) means that on the psychological and social plane, the individual struggles with painful experiences of anxiety, loss of a sense of value and dignity, and experiences of individual and social rejection. Disability is a stressor that affects (but does not determine) the well-being, self-esteem, and psychosocial situation of the person burdened with it. There is feedback between the loss of fitness and the mental state and adaptability of the individual.

Students with disabilities are most afraid of negative reactions from their fellow students. They feel ashamed about their own disability. They are afraid their needs will be misunderstood. They indicate a lack of social support, experience stereotypes (a clumsy person, causing problems) or prejudice. This group of students pointed to problems in finding a trusted friend and dependence on third parties.

These types of problems undoubtedly affect the limited integration of students with disabilities into the academic community. Such an experience exceeds the possibilities of an individual to cope in many everyday situations, also at

the University. It is a disruption of the normal course of events in a human life, it requires a reassessment of the ways of thinking and acting (Płużek, 2002). So how can the University support the functioning of students with disabilities in the emotional sphere as well as interpersonal relations? There should be undertaken various activities aiming at education through the organization of the environment for the specific needs of people with adaptation disorders. According to Zacharuk (2010) society and its services should adapt to the "unadapted" to a greater extent than currently. Inclusion strategies should include organization of activities by the State School of Higher Education to raise awareness of the specifics of the functioning of this group of students. The solution proposed by the respondents themselves is to organize talks, open lectures on „how to understand disability restrictions,” „special workshops and classes related to various types of disabilities.” Hanging up posters can also be effective. It is necessary to modify peer behavior towards students with disabilities. The sooner correct attitudes begin to shape, the greater the chance that the effects will be positive. John Rawls expresses the known truth that just how things are does not mean they should be: „The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts” (Rawls, 1994, p. 348). According to Rawls, fair society requires a strong sense of community and must find a way for citizens to feel responsible for the fate of the whole country and take into account the common good (Szulczewski, 2008).

The integration of people with disabilities with nondisabled people is also the responsibility of academic teachers. Maria Grzegorzewska in her letters to a young teacher states that a man must be brought up, (...) a man who would like to fill the forms of (...) life with the best content, that is, to change into life his best values, which he would be able to do for a matter which he considers for the great and above chosen one, not only to fight, but also to work for it in everyday life (Grzegorzewska, 1958). She noticed that the value of building a life always depends primarily on the quality of its content, depending on the value of the man who creates, develops, and builds it. So it must be created by a free, ethical, socialized and full person.

The results obtained undoubtedly approach the functioning of students with disabilities at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska. However, they do not suggest the University is responsible for the difficulties but rather refer to the individual situation of the respondents. The contribution of work certainly refers to social and interpersonal relations of the examined group of people in terms of designing and implementing inclusive education activities.

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[www.pswbp.pl/index.php/pl/dlaczego-warto-studiowa-w-psw/6953](http://www.pswbp.pl/index.php/pl/dlaczego-warto-studiowa-w-psw/6953)

## EDUKACJA AKADEMICKA STUDENTÓW Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIAMI NA PRZYKŁADZIE PAŃSTWOWEJ SZKOŁY WYŻSZEJ IM. PAPIEŻA JANA PAWŁA II W BIAŁEJ PODLASKIEJ

### *Abstrakt*

W ostatnich dekadach zarówno na świecie, jak i w Polsce wzrosło zainteresowanie problematyką uczestnictwa osób z niepełnosprawnościami w życiu publicznym, społecznym, zawodowym, a szczególnie edukacyjnym. Literatura przedmiotu wskazuje na liczne publikacje dotyczące edukacji dzieci i młodzieży z niepełnosprawnościami. Fakt ten nie dziwi, gdyż edukacja na poziomie szkoły podstawowej i średniej jest w naszym kraju obligatoryjna. Warunkuje także podjęcie kształcenia na studiach wyższych. Funkcjonowanie studentów z niepełnosprawnościami na uczelniach wyższych nie jest już tak obszernie komentowane w literaturze. Według danych Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego w 2007 r. w Polsce było 22 988 studentów z niepełnosprawnościami, a w 2012 r. liczba ta wzrosła do 31 613 osób. Od 2013 r. liczba osób z ograniczoną sprawnością podejmujących studia zaczęła spadać – w 2013 r. było ich jeszcze 28 940, a w 2016 r. już tylko 25 121 osób z niepełnosprawnościami dążyło do uzyskania wykształcenia wyższego, co stanowiło 1,86% ogólnej liczby studentów w Polsce. Warto również zwrócić uwagę, że w 2002 roku zaledwie 4,6% osób z niepełnosprawnościami posiadało wyższe wykształcenie. W Państwowej Szkole Wyższej im. Papieża Jana Pawła II w Białej Podlaskiej od roku 2006 liczba studentów z niepełnosprawnościami utrzymuje się na względnie stałym poziomie – 50 osób, co stanowi 1,7% ogólnej liczby studentów uczelni. Celem badań było określenie specyfiki funkcjonowania studentów z niepełnosprawnościami na tej uczelni w kontekście proponowanych im tu warunków kształcenia. Rezultaty ujawniają, że studenci z niepełnosprawnością jako źródło trudności w studiowaniu wskazują raczej na swoją trudną sytuację indywidualną niż na warunki stworzone przez uczelnię.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wykształcenie wyższe, edukacja włączająca, studenci z niepełnosprawnościami, ograniczenia, bariery